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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of employment as a focus of identity in women's divorce adjustment. Based on data from 40 semi-structured interviews, four salient aspects of the worker's role were measured: (1) meaningfulness; (2) social interaction/support; (3) productivity; and (4) positive distraction. Work identity was associated with higher levels of self-esteem (n=.32, p=.05) and lower levels of distress (n=-.35, p=.03). These relationships remained significant with controls for job status, income, and education. Researchers employed scale items to measure present work identity while open-ended ratings in the interview revealed patterns of future-oriented work identity. For future-oriented women, current work was unrewarding but financially necessary in the search for a better career. Without an open-ended item, some women would have appeared unqualifiedly low in work identity. While work identity and work-related traits were linked, job desirability varied according to personal goals. There seemed to be an income threshold below which work could not buffer the deleterious effects of poverty, an issue that should be explored by using a more diverse socioeconomic cross-section. These results support the role of work identity in women's adjustment to divorce. (Contains 25 references.) (RJM)

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The Role of Work Identity in Women's Adjustment to Divorce

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Abstract

Based on data from 40 semi-structured interviews, this inquiry explored the role of employment as a focus of identity in women's divorce adjustment. Four salient aspects of the worker role were measured: meaningfulness, social interaction/support, productivity, and positive distraction. The work identity measure was associated with higher levels of self-esteem ($r=.32$, $p=.05$) and lower levels of distress ($r=-.35$, $p=.03$). These relationships remained significant with controls for job status, income, and education. Examination of an open-ended assessment of work's importance to sense of self validated the scale score results. Qualitative analyses clarified the links among marriage, divorce, and work, enabled a retrospective view of changes following divorce, and differentiated the work identity components. The analyses revealed a pattern of "future-oriented" work identity wherein current work was unrewarding but financially necessary in the search for a better career. The study supports the role of work identity in women's divorce adjustment.

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Goals

- To highlight work's potential role as an identity source and coping mechanism for women experiencing divorce.
- To identify the salient aspects of working within the divorce context.
- To show that occupancy of even moderately low level jobs may facilitate commitment to working and predict well-being in divorced women.
- To offer divorcees an opportunity to reflect critically on their changed life structures for purposes of personal growth.

Introduction

While divorce is a potentially stressful life course event, (Weiss 1976, 1988), it also may facilitate personal growth in women (Baruch et al. 1983; Crosby 1990; Kohen et al. 1981; Miller 1982; Riessman 1990). Recent studies (Wheaton 1990) diverge from most traditional accounts (Weiss 1975) that emphasize the inevitability and exclusivity of psychological distress. This suggests that mechanisms associated with women's adjustment to divorce must continue to be explored.

Divorce challenges women's traditional domestic role (Riessman 1990). Forging an extramarital identity thus is key to adjustment (Vaughan 1986) and paid work may serve as a focus. Women's rates of labor force participation have risen sharply since the 1950s and current estimates suggest that the pace will intensify (Moen 1992). Moreover, divorce impels women to become

breadwinners who must secure their own survival and often that of dependents with minimal aid (Crosby 1990). Since role activity strengthens role commitment (Bielby and Bielby 1989), divorcees are uniquely situated to develop heightened work identity.

Employment predicts women's emotional well-being (Baruch and Barnett 1986; Baruch et al. 1987; Golding 1989; Kandel et al. 1985) and may act as a buffer during life transitions (Crosby 1990). These effects do not appear to derive solely from work-related factors (Baruch et al. 1983; Hornstein 1986), such as job status, income, and education. Rather, subjective assessments of the work context are themselves important (Repetti 1987a).

The literature (Crosby 1990; Lottinville and Scherman 1988; Miller 1982) suggests that four aspects of work may counterbalance stressful marital experiences. These include using work as a locus of: 1) meaningfulness, 2) social interaction/support, 3) productivity, and 4) positive distraction. No study has systematically examined all four components in relation to self-esteem and psychological distress among recently divorced women.

Hypothesis

Divorced women with higher work identity will report significantly higher self-esteem and lower psychological distress than those with lower work identity.

Method

Sampling and Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 40 Caucasian women, divorced for 4 years or less and separated for an average of 32 months. Twenty-nine women were parents. All worked (most full-time) in jobs from professional to clerical or as graduate students. Sessions took 2 to 3 hours.

Measures

A 23-item Work Identity Scale was developed to assess overall job importance and satisfaction, in addition to work as a source of meaningfulness, social interaction/support, productivity, and positive distraction. The scale was scored on a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Respondents' scores ranged from 62 to 105 (of a possible 115 points). The scale was highly reliable, with an alpha of .87.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) and the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff 1977) were used to assess divorce adjustment.

Job level was measured with the revised Duncan's Socioeconomic Index (SEI) (Stevens and Featherman 1981) and Prestige Scores by Nakao, Hodge, and Treas (1990). Total household income and education also were assessed, along with other demographic variables. These included the number of weekly work hours, receipt of a job promotion during the previous year, total number of years a respondent had lived with her ex-partner,

number of months separated and living apart, control over divorce initiation, involvement in a new romantic relationship, age, number of children living with the respondent and of them number of preschoolers, degree of financial burden for off-spring, and ex-spouse's job SEI and job prestige.

Open-ended items examined reasons for working, factors motivating specific career choices, work experiences, job plans and considerations, attitude shifts toward career, the role of work in the divorce context, the effects of divorce on work life, and the impact of working on sense of self.

In order to validate the work identity scale scores, the interviewer assigned respondents open-ended ratings of overall work identity. Women who claimed that work "is [their] identity" or is "one of [their] most important identities" or "very important" received "high" (+1) work identity ratings; if work was "somewhat important," "a little important" or "third or fourth," a "neutral" (0) score was given; if work was "not at all important" or "not very important," a "low" (-1) score was assigned.

Results

Correlations between Work Identity and Self-esteem and Distress

Work identity was significantly associated with both outcomes: higher self-esteem ($r=.32$, $p=.046$) and lower distress ($r=-.35$, $p=.029$).

Multivariate Analyses Controlling for Background Variables

Potential confounders of the association between work identity and well-being were key work-related traits (job SEI, job prestige, income, and education). None of these covariates significantly predicted self-esteem (Table 1) or distress (Table 2), while the betas for work identity resembled initial correlations with the outcome variables. Women with higher work identity continued to have significantly higher self-esteem and lower distress. Of the four work-related covariates, the effects of income were strongest (though still nonsignificant). Models predicting the outcome variables from work identity that included the additional demographics also were nonsignificant.

Fit between Open- and Close-ended Work Identity Measures

The work identity scale scores and the interviewer ratings of work's importance to sense of self fit 80% of the time within a point both ways of the scale mean of 92. If work was rated as "very important," scale scores tended to fall at 92 or above; if work was "somewhat important," scores were between 91 and 93; if work was "not very important," scores were 92 or below.

Qualitative Analyses of Work Identity, Work-related Traits, and Well-being

How do women with high work identity describe work's meaning in their lives? As a researcher in the sample exhorted:

"[Work's] just who I am! I feel so lucky to be able to do what I enjoy." While job level and income are positively associated with work identity (r=.39; r=.44), variation exists. Some lower status women viewed their jobs as prestigious. Work may be central to sense of self if it matches personal standards and expectations, as is evident in this receptionist's account of her former career as beautician: "I had a beauty salon when I was first married....I had a professional business." Provided that work identity was high, women of moderately low status were not disadvantaged emotionally. However, women at very low status and income levels were undersampled in this study. The data suggest an income threshold below which positive job experiences cannot buffer the deleterious effects of poverty.

Future-oriented Work Identity

Five respondents clustered into a pattern of "future-oriented work identity." In this group, work identity scores were low since the current job offered scant satisfaction. Work paid the bills while the women pursued outside career paths (e.g. school). As a lab assistant with artistic leanings noted: "Being an artist means always living for the future." Most striking about this pattern is the discrepancy between present and ideal views of work. As an office manager and aspiring academic commented of work's salience: "In this job, work's very unimportant! In the future, it'll be the most important thing."

Components of Work Identity

The accounts validated the four work identity components.

Meaningfulness

Approximately 75% of the women described work as a source of meaning, often stressing creativity and intellectual stimulation. This perception was not limited to professionals, as is evident from an administrative aide's claim: "My job challenges me on how far I can go with my capability of thinking, brainstorming, and creativity." A second subtheme of meaningfulness, popular even outside of the "helping professions," was doing for others. As a real estate broker noted: "It's a nice way to give something back....to help people get their dream of their own house."

Social Interaction/Support

About 75% of the sample used work as a source of social interaction and support. For some women, including this researcher, mere participation was enough: "It was helpful just being around people." Others spoke of a deeper need to forge relationships. Many turned to coworkers (often also divorcees) for emotional support. As a clerical worker explained: "My coworkers really do care. Like when I was going through divorce, they really wanted to know if I was okay....If I wasn't working here, I probably would've gone to professional help a lot longer." While many mentioned a peer or two whom they did not like, most were adept at compensating with positive ties.

Productivity

Nearly 66% of the respondents viewed work as a context for productivity. Here, perceiving the self as competent was key. An administrative aide articulated this view well: "I maintained a high level of performance at work. It was one thing I knew I could do and be good at....If there were problems, I knew I could handle it." Feelings such as these were motivational. Some used the job as a growth path, as did an administrative aide: "I'm really good at my job!....I took this position partly 'cause of good promotions and long-term benefits. My supervisor will retire in a few years and that'd be a great career opportunity."

Positive Distraction

Just over 50% of the women regarded work as a source of positive distraction. As articulated by a social services director: "Working kept me on track....It gave me perspective. Why sit at home and mope when you can be getting good things done?....Working lets me look ahead positively." Some, such as this health care aide, noted the benefits of focussing on the needs of others: "Work was a crutch. If I was upset....I'd go to work and forget about it. It helped to deal with others' problems....It takes the focus off my own problems." While distractions might be temporary, most welcomed any respite.

Conclusions

This inquiry examined the role of work identity in women's divorce adjustment. Work identity related positively to self-esteem and inversely to distress.

Close- and open-ended measures of work identity fit well together. Four components of work identity (i.e., meaningfulness, social interaction/support, productivity, and positive distraction) could be distinguished as helping women to adjust to the stress of divorce.

Scale items measured present work identity, while the open-ended rating revealed a pattern of future-oriented work identity. For future-oriented women, current work was unrewarding but financially necessary, enabling the pursuit of a better career. Without an open-ended item, some women would have appeared unqualifiedly low in work identity.

While work identity and work-related traits were linked, job desirability varied somewhat according to personal goals. Still, there seemed to be an income threshold below which work could not buffer the deleterious effects of poverty. This issue should be explored using a more diverse socioeconomic cross-section.

The inquiry lends initial support to the role of work identity in women's adjustment to divorce. Given their theoretical and practical import, these relationships should continue to be explored.

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Table 1 Regression Models Predicting Self-Esteem from Work Identity for Four Work-related Traits

Variables	Beta	t	p
Work identity	.3104	1.831	.0751
Job SEI	.0162	.096	.9243
(Constant)		3.116	.0035
R^2 = .10			
Work identity	.3344	1.978	.0554
Job Prestige	-.0456	-.270	.7890
(Constant)		3.129	.0034
R^2 = .10			
Work identity	.2954	1.702	.0972
Income	.0484	.279	.7818
(Constant)		3.135	.0034
R^2 = .10			
Work identity	.3447	2.173	.0362
Education	-.1256	-.792	.4337
(Constant)		3.196	.0028
R^2 = .12			

[a]p of .10 was specified a priori, due to small sample size

Table 2 Regression Models Predicting Distress from Work Identity for Four Work-related Traits

Variables	Beta	t	p
Work identity	-.3145	-1.881	.0678
Job SEI	-.0806	-.482	.6326
(Constant)		3.202	.0028
R^2 = .13			
Work identity	-.3559	-2.127	.0401
Job Prestige	.0254	.152	.8801
(Constant)		3.127	.0034
R^2 = .12			
Work identity	-.3068	-1.791	.0814
Income	-.0890	-.520	.6062
(Constant)		3.125	.0035
R^2 = .13			
Work identity	-.3740	-2.384	.0224
Education	.1252	.798	.4301
(Constant)		3.139	.0033
R^2 = .13			

[a]p of .10 was specified a priori, due to small sample size